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Epiphany 1C
Peace, Seattle
January 13, 2013
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

WADING IN THE WATER

Something strange caught my eye as I approached the water's edge at Lincoln Park a few days ago.

- One hundred yards down the shore I saw what looked like a man walking parallel to the beach in chest deep water.
- But was it a man? And was he in distress? Was he coming to the aid of someone or something else—man or beast—that I couldn't see? Had some strange compulsion taken him over?
- Did he require rescue?

My mind raced through a dozen scenarios that might explain why someone would be wading in Puget Sound on a sub-40 degree January day.

- The polar bear plungers had done their thing on New Year's Day—most of them dashing into the water and then out again in a matter of seconds.
- But this guy (yes, he WAS a guy) seemed in no hurry whatsoever as he calmly walked further away from me, in no apparent distress.
- Convinced that no action on my part was required (thank goodness!), my caution turned to curiosity and I simply watched him.

A few minutes later he turned and headed for shore, and then, when he hit land, began jogging on the path in my direction.

I could see, now, what he was wearing. A grey t-shirt, a pair of running shorts, socks, and running shoes—and, oh yes, he wore a smile on his face, too.

He headed for the men's bathroom, and, as curiosity by that time had me firmly in its grasp, I turned to follow him. I had to find out what made this guy tick!

SO…I asked him, trying to sound nonchalant, as we stood in the restroom taking care of business, DO YOU DO THAT OFTEN?

ABOUT ONCE A MONTH, he said, and before I could get out another question, he was out of the restroom and gone.

Since that encounter 10 days ago, I've been wondering what could explain how wading in water in the middle of winter brought this man deep satisfaction.

As we mark the baptism of our Lord today, we witness another man wading in the water—not the frigid waters of Puget Sound but the shallow, muddy waters of the Jordan.

Every story, every encounter the Scriptures record that has to do with water—from creation's watery chaos to the great flood to the Red Sea—is attendant here in Jordan's waters.

Preaching to new converts preparing for baptism, 4th cent. Bishop Maximus tells them:

> "In the baptism of the Savior the blessing which flowed down like a spiritual stream touched the outpouring of every flood and the course of every stream."

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> "We must," he goes on, "be baptized by the same stream as the Savior was. But in order to be dipped in the same water, we do not require the regions of the East nor the river in Jewish lands, for now Christ is everywhere and the Jordan is everywhere. The same consecration that blessed the rivers of the East sanctifies the waters of the West. Thus even if perchance a river should have some other name in this world, there is in it nonetheless the mystery of the Jordan."

Waters threaten death and bring life. They protect us in our mother's womb and then bear us out into the world. They have the capacity both to kill us and to keep us alive. They are full of danger and full of promise.

I read in last week's paper about the huge increase in hay thefts within those rural areas in the middle of our country which have been suffering so severely from drought in recent years.

> "Months of punishing drought and grass fires have pushed the price of hay, grain and other animal feed to near records this year, making the golden bales an increasingly irresistible target for thieves. Some steal them for profit. Others are fellow farmers acting out of desperation, their fields too brown to graze animals and their finances too wrecked to afford enough feed for their cattle."[1]

When water is scarce, everything is uncertain, ways of life are threatened, and people find themselves making choices they would never have dreamed of making when rain was plentiful.

We in the Northwest are fortunate to have plentiful water resources. When I look west on these clear days and see the snow pack on the Olympics I breathe a sigh of relief. In years to come, as water resources becomes more and more precious, it's predicted that waters of this region will draw people here as never before.

But the quantity of water isn't the only issue. The quality of these waters, and how they support life that's also at stake.

The diminishing salmon runs in Puget Sound raise fundamental questions about what this means for the orcas, seals and other species dependent on them for food, but also the Native peoples whose livelihood and cultural and spiritual identity have been irrevocably linked to the salmon for centuries. The removal of the Elwha and Glines Canyon dams has brought a ray of hope to the otherwise bleak conversation, but larger issues such as the impact of the increasing acidity of ocean waters, are bringing new challenges to the fore.[2]

What St. Maximus knew in the 4th century, we are coming to see now in a new way, that the waters of the Jordan—full of danger, full of promise—make all waters holy, all streams sacred, and protecting the water that fills this font and the fonts of every Christian community around the world is, I believe, the vocation of every Christian congregation and community wherever they may be.

Like the man I saw in the waters of the Sound, we too have been drawn with Jesus, by the Spirit's call, to wade in the waters and find our lives reinvigorated and renewed.

Verse three of Thomas Troeger's hymn announces that call with these words:[3]

> Come bow beneath the flowing wave. Christ stands here at your side
> and raises you as from the grave God raised the crucified.

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[1] See article by Jack Healey published in the *Seattle Times:* http://seattletimes.com/html/nationworld/2020097493_haytheftsxml.html
[2] See NOAA's website: http://pmel.noaa.gov/co2/story/Ocean+Acidification
[3] Thomas H. Troeger, © 1984; rev. 1993, Oxford University Press, Inc.

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"We were buried with Christ in a baptism unto death," wrote St. Paul, in words I spoke over Millie Jacobsen's grave yesterday, "so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:4)

Our baptism isn't something that just happened to happen to us at one time in our lives, it's the core of who we are and whose we are.

When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit affirmed his identity as a beloved son of God and then sent him on his mission to the world.

The water that touched us—and touches us still—is that same water, and every day, every moment it blesses our lives by calling us back to remind us who we are.

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you," says Isaiah to God's exiled people, "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." (Isaiah 43:2a, 4a)

Once we pass through these waters, our lives cannot remain the same, for to wade in baptismal water is to answer God's invitation to go deep with Jesus Christ.

And when we wade in those baptismal waters, we never wade alone.
Christ wades in the water with us, and gives us a name and a destiny and a community to surround us and to buoy us up when we get above our heads.

Trusting this promise, we sing:

> Water, River, Spirit, Grace, sweep over me, sweep over me!
> Recarve the depths your finger trace in sculpting me.[4]

Amen.

[4] Ibid.